ANNA ELIZABETH DICKINSON AND THE CIVIL WAR

BY

JAMES HARVEY YOUNG

A.B., Knox College, 1937

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AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN HISTORY IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1941

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ANNA ELIZABETH DICKINSON AND THE CIVIL WAR

Anna Elizabeth Dickinson was an oratorical prodigy who, during the Civil War, inspired a war-weary North at one of the periods of its deepest gloom, forwarded the abolition crusade during the moments of the realization of its aims, and pleaded the cause of the Republican Radicals during the days of their rise to power.

Anna was a Quaker lass from Philadelphia, only eighteen when the war broke out, who had gained a reputation in and around her native city by her speeches at anti-slavery and Quaker meetings. Disliking school teaching and working in the Philadelphia mint, Anna, in the spring of 1862, after losing her position in the mint for publicly accusing General McClellan of treason, accepted an invitation from William Lloyd Garrison to extend her oratorical endeavors to New England. The times were ripening for this girl with her passionate belief in emancipation and her winning oratorical power. After months and months of war, with steadily mounting casualty lists, with general replacing general, the war seemed no nearer a conclusion than when it had begun. The elections of 1862 had expressed the dissatisfaction in a way so tangible as almost to cost the administration its majority in the House. With so much to bemoan, the northern people were ready to welcome opportunities to wax enthusiastic, and the enthusiasm was likely to be excessive. "They do mistake," averred one newspaper, "who do think we want all argument in our public speeches now. We want Peter the Hermit, to preach crusades."[1] For Northerners of radical bent, Northerners who believed in the emancipation of the slaves as a war aim, one stimulus to enthusiasm was provided by the appearance on New England's rostrums

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[1] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Scrapbook, Anna E. Dickinson Papers. These Papers, the primary source for the dissertation, are housed in the Division of Manuscripts, the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. The collection was received by the Division of Manuscripts, according to the accession card, on May 5, 1933, less than a year after Miss Dickinson's death, "in five trunks (four very small, fifth about twice as large)." It is composed of letters, scrapbooks of newspaper clippings, manuscript lectures and plays, photographs and various items of memorabilia covering the period, roughly, 1860 to 1920.

of Anna Dickinson. Because she was a girl and not a venerable sage, she was welcomed not as Peter the Hermit but as Joan of Arc.

The spectacle of a young lady upon the lecture platform, as assured as any man of her right to discuss the burning questions of the day, acted like a magnet. Her appearance on the rostrum was striking. Anna was slender; her short brown hair rippled in waves over her head and tossed like a mane when she spoke; her face was round, her nose Grecian, her chin determined, and her grey eyes expressive. Newspaper reporters debated among themselves whether she was "beautiful" or merely "handsome" and "prepossessing." She had a strong contralto voice and the habit of distinct enunciation. Though her gestures were wooden, her intense earnestness while speaking, her emotional self-immersion in her subject, absorbed all but the most critical in her audiences. Anna was adept at painting with melodramatic pathos incidents of soldier heroism learned from the lips of the wounded in Philadelphia hospitals; her greatest oratorical talent was the sarcastic scorn with which she flayed any opponent of the principles she supported.

Such a fascinating and eloquent figure appealed to the Radical Republican politicians, initially to Benjamin Franklin Prescott, chairman of the New Hampshire Republican state committee, and Anna was taken from the lecture platforms of anti-slavery societies to the political stump for the 1863 spring campaigns in New Hampshire and Connecticut. These campaigns were watched closely by those interested in the political scene to determine whether or not the serious trend of 1862 away from Republican banners would continue. In New Hampshire, where the Republican candidate for governor was an abolitionist and where the party platform condemned slavery as the cause of the war, Anna attracted the largest audiences of the campaign. Though the Republicans won the governorship only after the election had been thrown into the Republican-dominated legislature, the Republican press insisted that had Anna Dickinson spoken in every town in the state, the victory would have been much more decisive.

The Connecticut election, because of the clear-cut issues, was considered a perfect political barometer. Against the Republican incumbent, Buckingham, the Democrats chose as their gubernatorial candidate an out-spoken critic of administration policy,

Thomas H. Seymour. Both sides girded themselves for a violent, bitter campaign, with the Democrats boasting of an easy victory, and the Republicans not sanguine of success. The Republicans imported an array of stump speakers, including three governors, several generals, and a young woman destined to usurp the major share of acclaim. The members of the state committee had hesitated at permitting a woman to enter the lists, but after Anna Dickinson's first address at Hartford, they had changed heart like converts at a revival, and indeed the situations had kindred elements. Hundreds were turned away from the crowded halls where Anna spoke; she was selected to give the wind-up address of the campaign in Hartford. Appealing for the most part to Irish laborers, Anna undertook to convince them that Democratic free trade was certain to bring to America old world starvation, that exemptions in the conscription law really were to benefit the poor, that a Confederate victory meant an end to the laboring man's dream of free homes, schools, churches in the West.

Buckingham squeezed through to victory over Seymour, and Anna Dickinson was given the lion's share of the credit as slayer of Connecticut Copperheads. Serenaded by bands, showered with watches, revolvers, ornaments—and currency—she was likened not only to Joan of Arc, but in various attributes to Portia, Pythia, Evangeline, Juliet, Cassandra. The opposition journals, finding Anna a force to be contended with, were not to be outdone at name-calling and replied with "spiritual medium," "Witch of Endor," "female Cicero," "parrot," and "crowing hen." The popularity gained from the Connecticut campaign opened to Anna the great lecture halls of the North, and she reaped a greenback profit from her fame.

In the autumn of 1863 Anna, rejecting an offer from the Ohio Republicans, employed her talents in the coal-mining regions of her native state in the campaign to re-elect Governor Curtin. She saw his triumph and hurried to Buffalo to share with Curtin in a plea for a Republican victory in the Empire state.

Anna's stump speaking in behalf of the Republicans led directly to the zenith of her career. Through the arrangements of W. D. Kelley, a Radical representative from Philadelphia, she was invited to deliver a lecture in the Hall of the House of Representatives in Washington. Nearly a hundred congressional signatures graced the document of invitation, Vice-President Hamlin

and Speaker Colfax signing first.[2] On January 16, 1864, the Hall was crowded with as distinguished an audience as the capital could provide: senators, cabinet members, supreme court justices, representatives, sharing space with reporters, diplomats, and war celebrities. Escorted to the rostrum by Hamlin and Colfax, Anna was once more likened to Joan of Arc in the introduction by the vice-president. Her "words for the hour" were not unfamiliar to the Radical Republicans who, in truth, had invited her to present their own ideas to them anew, for her caustic castigations, her touching tales of soldier heroism, her symbolic allusions all pointed the same moral she had stressed in her stump speeches. Anna likened the Democratic party, displaced from power in 1860, to "the mass of revolting life" on the bottom of a "stone suddenly upheaved from its long resting-place."[3] Emancipation was a fact, she insisted, but it was not enough; the brave negro should have a soldier's full pay, a man's rights, a share of the traitor's confiscated estate, and a constitutional amendment to protect him from the Supreme Court.

Anna was in the midst of a violent attack on Lincoln's amnesty proclamation and his lenient plan of reconstruction announced the previous month, when the president and his wife entered the Hall. Lincoln sat with bowed head as the self-possessed oratress finished her criticisms and, suddenly changing tack, announced that she favored the president's re-election. Why Anna took this stand in view of her fervent opposition to Lincoln's moderate policies, we cannot be sure. Perhaps it was at the suggestion of an unwise friend of the president; perhaps Lincoln's presence startled Anna into the statement as a sort of apology for her criticisms; most likely, in view of Anna's temperament, the words were inserted on the spur of the moment by the young lady, warmed and flattered by the president's entrance, with the possible hope that such a blessing coupled with her criticism might help work a desirable

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[2] Members of the Senate and House to Anna Dickinson, December 16, 1863, Anna E. Dickinson Papers. Among the signers were Charles Sumner, John Sherman, Henry Wilson, S. C. Pomeroy, Benjamin F. Wade, Thaddeus Stevens, James A. Garfield, J. H. Lane, Robert C. Schenck, George W. Julian, Oakes Ames, B. Gratz Brown, Owen Lovejoy, and J. G. Blaine. The invitation and Anna's letter of acceptance were printed in the *Daily National Intelligencer*, Washington, January 16, 1864.

[3] *Sunday Chronicle*, Washington, January 17, 1864.

change in his policies. Both the president and the Radicals, foreseeing their battle over the issue of reconstruction, must have felt considerable embarrassment.

Anna's support of Lincoln was bound to be fleeting in view of her radical beliefs, and as she journeyed into the Midwest to fulfill invitations to repeat the Washington lecture, she omitted her plea for Lincoln's re-election and increased the venom of her attack upon his policies. Less than two months after the address she wrote her friend Whitelaw Reid a full confession of her error in bestowing her blessing on Lincoln. In April, Anna secured an interview with the president, which she described in an address at Boston on April 27. The opposition *Boston Daily Courier* reported the episode.[4] She ridiculed the presidential person—"his figure—his dress—his old coat, out at the elbows which look[ed] as if he had worn it three years and used it as a pen wiper—his stocking limp and soiled." During the interview the president remarked: "That reminds me of a little story." "I didn't come to hear stories," she replied, "I can read better ones in the papers any day than you can tell me." She told Lincoln his plan of reconstruction was "all wrong; as radically bad as can be." He ended the conversation, according to Anna's account, by remarking, "All I can say is, if the radicals want me to lead, let them get out of the way and let me lead." "When he said that," Anna told her Boston audience, "I came out and remarked to a friend —I have spoken my last word to President Lincoln." This exhibition of a determined young lady petulantly scolding the president of the nation indicates how her attitude had shifted since January; it shows also that adulation as a darling of the Radicals had not developed in Anna Dickinson a sense of propriety and respect.

As the campaign of 1864 developed, Anna lapsed into a public silence, but the course of her thoughts paralleled that of many Radicals. She had been aware of the abortive Chase movement headed by her friend, Senator Pomeroy. Radical friends like Whitelaw Reid, B. F. Prescott, the New Hampshire politician, and Theodore Tilton, editor of the *Independent*, had expressed to her their hope that the Baltimore convention might be postponed. Although Frémont had been one of Anna's idols, she refused to join

[4] *Boston Daily Courier*, April 28, 1864.

Wendell Phillips in supporting him after his nomination at Cleveland, distrusting his circle of friends and fearing a Copperhead coalition. In the midsummer gloom, caused by lack of military success, Lincoln's pocket veto of the Wade-Davis bill, and the resignation of Chase, Anna was informed of the hope of certain Radicals to replace Lincoln as Republican nominee at a proposed Cincinnati convention. This plot evaporated with the Democratic convention, its so-called peace plank and its nominee McClellan, and with news of Sherman's capture of Atlanta. Yet as late as mid-September one of Anna's correspondents wrote that Sumner still had hopes of a Radical substitution, and Whitelaw Reid confessed: "... I know one young person, who does not mean to get on the stool of repentance, & who will vote for Mr Lincoln, if at all, very much as he has swallowed pills."[5] Anna, though feeling the same about Lincoln, had climbed the stool of repentance early in September with a letter to the *Independent* stressing the necessity of support for the Republican party if Radical aims were to succeed.[6] McClellan had been her particular *bête noire* throughout the war, and her campaign addresses consisted primarily of vicious, biased attacks on the Democratic candidate. Anna hardly mentioned the name of Lincoln. With the president's re-election she rounded the circle and joined the Radicals's continuing compaign for a vindictive reconstruction policy.

Bred in the abolition school, Anna spoke for its tenets. She approached all American history, of the past as well as of the moment, with the fixed idea of the moral evil of slavery. Her convictions were entirely emotional, distilled from the pages of abolition journals and tracts and from the lips of abolition orators and friends. It was an oversimplified world of suffering saints and oppressive devils. The saints, the oppressed negroes and the abolitionists who sought their welfare, were to be wept over and cheered. The devils, the southern slavocracy and its northern ally, the Democratic party, were to be hooted at and damned. Even Lincoln was a stock character in Anna's addresses: when his policies were good in her eyes she pictured him as very, very good; when his acts were bad, she denounced him as horrid. In

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[5] Whitelaw Reid to Anna Dickinson, September 11, 1864, Anna E. Dickinson Papers.

[6] *Independent*, New York, September 8, 1864.

the spring of 1862, Lincoln's annulment of General Hunter's proclamation freeing the slaves in his department caused Anna to criticise the president publicly as being "not so far from . . . a slave-catcher after all," and privately she wrote him down as "an Ass . . . for the Slave Power to ride."[7] With the emancipation proclamation, which Anna took at more than face value, she lauded him. Later, she lashed his reconstruction plan and in mid-1864 mimicked from the lecture platform his personal characteristics. Yet in January, as an illustration of the caprice of the young oratress, she had advocated Lincoln's re-election at a time when Radicals were beginning to think of replacing him. The conscious absence of references to Lincoln in Anna's 1864 campaign addresses was followed by bitter direct rebuke after Lincoln's conference with the Confederate commissioners at Hampton Roads early the next February. This background caused Anna to sound insincere when she hastened to sing a hymn of praise immediately after his assassination. That the praise was mixed with a plea for unrelenting justice and a savage attack on General Lee indicated that Anna had no comprehension of the basis for Lincoln's greatness, that the Civil War, in her eyes, had not ended.

Anna Dickinson's contribution was not of the type that tips delicately balanced scales; her importance lies in the fact that she was an example, a strikingly colorful example, of a general trend. With the possible exception of the 1863 Connecticut campaign, she decisively influenced the outcome of no event during the war. She was, in Wendell Phillips's phrase, "the young elephant sent forward to try the bridges to see if they were safe for older ones to cross."[8] This is true to the extent that the Radicals, for reasons of expediency, accepted abolition tenets as their policy, and Anna was an abolitionist from the beginning, though not a pace-maker of abolition doctrine. Anna was a tool of the Radicals only in that her principles largely coincided with their principles, and they could benefit by votes and opinion she could capture with the novelty of her sex and youth and the spellbinding of her fiery words. The opposition journals were partly correct in dubbing Anna a parrot, for she absorbed what she read, casting

[7] *Liberator*, Boston, June 6, 1862; Anna Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, May 27, 1862, Anna E. Dickinson Papers.

[8] Cited in Anthony, Stanton, and Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, II, 42.

the thoughts into her own dramatic oratory. That her spirit of independence made her an undependable tool is illustrated by her advocacy of Lincoln's re-election in her Washington speech, by the tone of the counsel Prescott wrote her during the late summer of 1864, which was not in the nature of a command given to a subordinate eagerly awaiting orders, but was a plea to an equal whose judgment was independently determined. Capitalizing on the spirit of vindictiveness that war always arouses, Anna Dickinson's meteoric sweep across the North received a tremendous ovation, indicating the sentiment many in the North most wanted to applaud. In her devious political course are mirrored the kaleidoscopic aspects of the Republican party during the Civil War.

VITA

James Harvey Young was born on September 8, 1915, in Brooklyn, New York. He attended grade school in Plymouth, Indiana, and in Brimfield, Illinois; high school in Galesburg, Illinois. In June, 1937, he was graduated, *magna cum laude*, with an A.B. degree from Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois. He was a Scholar in History at the University of Illinois for the year 1937-38, receiving his A.M. degree in history in August, 1938. In 1938-39 and 1939-40 he was an Assistant in History, in 1940-41, a Fellow in History, at the University of Illinois. On August 25, 1940, he married Myrna Goode of Decatur, Illinois. He is a member of Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi, and Delta Sigma Rho.